USTR's Winder Building

Winder Building
Erected 1848
Purchased by United States Government 1852
During the Civil War this building was headquarters of the United States Army. Major General Winfield Scott, Major General Halleck, and later Lieutenant General U.S. Grant had their offices here. It also housed the Bureau of Military Justice, Engineer Office, Ordinance Office, and Office of the Commissioner for the Exchange of Prisoners. President Lincoln was a constant visitor during the trying days of the war and received here the latest dispatches by wire from the Army in the west and by courier from the southern front. In addition to conferences with his military commanders, it is recorded that he often came at night to talk to prisoners held in the cells.
National Capital Sesquicentennial Commission
1950
(the inscription on the plaque by 17th Street entry)

The main offices of the United States Trade Representative are located in the Winder Building at 600 17th Street, NW in Washington, DC. The historical significance of the building dates back to its construction in the mid 1800s and the role that it played for its Government inhabitants. Along with its lively history, the building is known for its beautiful architecture as well as the number of myths associated with its past use, many of which are depicted on the plaque shown above, including some erroneous statements.


Winder Building, August 2000.

Building History

The Winder Building was built in 1848 by proprietor, William H. Winder, and supervising architects, Richard A. Gilpin and H. D. Cooper of Philadelphia. Construction was not started on the building until Mr. Winder received assurances by the U.S. Army and Navy that they would occupy the space. A deal was made to lease the building as a trial for five years at $21,875 per year or $175 per room.

Early lithograph, Winder Building in foreground.

Initially, Congress was hesitant to appropriate funds for the purchase of the building, despite the fact that the Government was desperate for office space. Before the Winder Building was constructed, the Government was forced to rent rooms in private, non-fireproof homes because the current Government space was so limited. Westward expansion and the Mexican War accounted for the lack of immediate money and the need for space. However, after many appraisals and much persuasion by the Secretary of War, W. L. Marcy, and other military officials, the building was officially bought by the Government in 1854 for $200,000. (This reflects one of the erroneous statements on the plaque, which states that the building was purchased in 1852.)

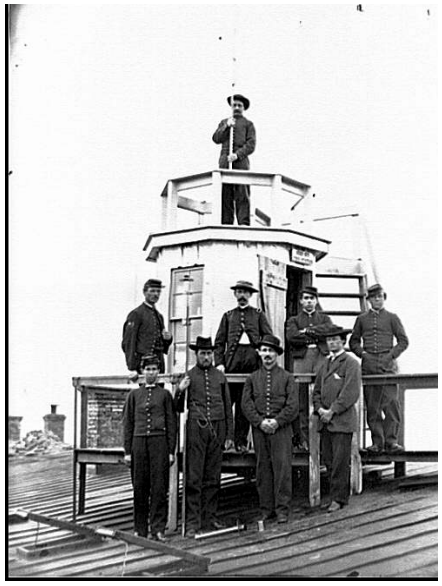
In 1969, the Secretary of the Interior determined the Winder Building to be a property of national importance. At the time of its nomination and appointment to the National Registry of Historic Places, the National Capital Planning Commission, described the Winder Building as "one of the few remaining pre-Civil War office buildings in Washington, probably the earliest and least altered one in existence." Speculators say that had the Winder Building not been occupied immediately by the Government, it would have most likely been sold as a hotel.

Past Tenants

The U.S. Government moved into the Winder Building as soon as construction was completed in 1848. The first organizations to inhabit the Winder Building were the Army

Ordinance Department, the Bureau of Topographical Engineers, and the Paymaster General. The Old Pension Office also was housed here and in several guide books the Winder Building is still referred to as the "Old Pension Building." Early on, Army and Navy offices, including the Navy's Engineer-in-Chief were located in the Winder Building. Offices of the Second Auditor of the Treasury and the Surgeon General's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery were later located in the building.

Around the time of the Civil War, 1860-65, occupants of the Winder Building were the Quartermaster General and the Navy's Bureau of Ordinance and Hydrography and later, the Headquarters for the Bureau of Military Justice under Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt. In 1865, the Winder roof served as a signal station of the Washington detachment of the U. S. Signal Corps for communication via flag signals to military fortifications and camps around Washington.



Photograph showing signal station on the roof of the Winder Building (1865).

After the Civil War, the Winder Building was used exclusively by the War Department, and housed a museum for the display of an ordinance collection later dispersed when the War Department moved into the State, War, and Navy Building (now the Eisenhower Executive Office Building). The museum was filled with large collections of arms, relics of various wars, and other military articles. In 1888, the building was transferred to the Department of the Treasury, which later built a cafeteria/restaurant for its employees in 1896. The Winder Building was then occupied by the Second Auditor of the Treasury and his staff exclusively for many years.

During World War I, part of the building was occupied by the Army. The General Staff of the Army was a tenant from 1935 until the Pentagon was completed in 1943. In 1949, the U.S. General Services Administration, which is the building manager for many Government facilities, took control of the Winder Building from the Federal Works Agency, and has maintained it ever since. In 1958, the Winder Building was occupied by the Office of Emergency Planning, formerly the Office of Defense Mobilization. During the 1970s, the building was being renovated and was used by the White House. At the end of the Carter Administration, the Council on Wage Price Stability occupied the building for a short time. In 1981, the Winder Building became USTR's third home. It previously had been housed at 1800 G Street, and before that USTR had been located in what is now the Eisenhower Executive Office Building when USTR was created in 1963.

Architecture

The Winder Building is well known for its historic architecture. The building has 60,000 square feet of floor space, 130 rooms on five floors with 104 windows. When built, it was the tallest and largest office building in the District, measuring 75 feet in height and 210 feet in length on the F Street facade. The building was constructed to be entirely fireproof with a pitched wooden roof, sheathed in sheet metal.

What architects find most exciting about the building, structurally speaking, is that it was the first building in the area to use central heating and the first to use cast iron beams. In theory, the existence of central heating was a triumph, but Winder's heating system was in reality, ineffective. As past tenants described, either the heat was "oppressive" or rooms were not heated at all. Early on, Congress purchased approximately 50 stoves to compensate for the disparity.

Another small error in construction was the durability of materials. In 1884, Adolf Cluss, an engineer, examined the building at the request of the Treasury Department and concluded,

> "Finally I call attention to the appearance of the fronts. The brickwork had been finished, many years ago, with a cement composition, then in vogue, which has proved worthless, has gradually worn off, and imparts to the ponderous building, the desolate looks of abandoned property."

Despite the report of cracks in the walls in subsequent years, which was attributed to either careless construction or imperfect foundations, the stability of the structure was not only unquestioned but admired as an architectural achievement. At one point in the building's early history, the roof blew off during a storm, but the fourth and fifth floor tenants were unaware of this.

Another rarity in American architecture is the wrought-iron tie which is found at the corners and cross walls of the building at every few rows of bricks, bracing the building together. Cluss delivered a word of warning: "All the floor beams are of cast iron. If one breaks and falls, with five tons of pressure, the falling beam may break every beam under it." Thus in 1884, it was recommended that no movable load should be placed over the outer ends of the building.

Internal and external improvements have been made to ameliorate the original structural concerns since its purchase in 1854. That year, gas lighting was installed for fear of fire generated by night watchmen's use of candles. Twenty-three offices were carpeted. In 1855, cobblestones were placed in the courtyard and surrounding the stable, which was the equivalent of a parking lot. In 1857, interior walls were painted and some covered with marbled wallpaper. Dangerous bricks protruding from the brick floor were removed several times throughout the years and then relaid. The privy out back was redecorated, sewers were laid, and new water closets were installed. In 1884, after numerous pleas for an allotment of money and years of

employees having to walk up to the fourth and fifth floors daily, Congress appropriated $6,500 for the installation of a water-hydraulic elevator. Initially, inhabitants were skeptical about the strength of the building and its ability to accommodate an elevator, but the shaft proved to actually lessen the pressure on the foundations and exterior walls.

In 1976, as part of the bicentennial, the Winder Building received most of its modern improvements. Air conditioning, heat, and general ventilation were installed between the old exterior walls of the building and the new walls that are seen on the outside today. Those walls are approximately one-foot thick and are of solid masonry as was popular at the time of its construction. Pipes were placed by the windows causing the deep window sills. To satisfy the fire safety codes, the stairwells were enclosed in glass and sprinklers were installed throughout the building. An elevator room was added to the building (the older elevators had been in a different location). Doors were restored to replicate the originals. The wrought iron balcony that we see today was restored. The original balcony, which ran along the second floor, had been sold as scrap metal in 1922.

This photograph shows the Winder Building after the original second-floor balcony had been removed.

Surroundings

There were three other buildings in close proximity with the Winder Building before 1974, the most noteworthy of which being the Winder Annex. It was constructed privately in 1882 by order of the Quartermaster General with the intention of future military inhabitancy.

Used mostly for office space, the Winder Annex was directly adjacent to the main building on the lefthand side facing Seventeenth Street. While the Winder Annex was a separate building, it echoed the Winder Building's style. At one time, each floor of the Annex was physically connected to the Winder Building, but it eventually became privately owned.

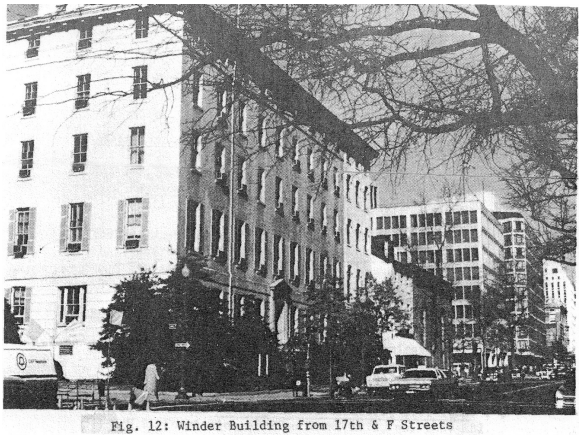


Fig. 12: Winder Building from 17th & F Streets

The Winder Annex can be seen clearly in this picture (it being at the end of the building and lighter in color).

Next to the Winder Annex, a federal-style townhouse, known by the name of Nichols Café and built exclusively for use as private dwellings, had been erected in 1830. Later the Nichols Café became a restaurant serving local workers throughout the early part of the 1900s. The Washington Loan and Trust Company built a bank located on the corner of 17th and G Streets in 1924. This bank later became part of Riggs National Bank in 1954 until it was vacated in 1965.

In 1969, the Winder Building was enrolled on the National Register of Historic Places as a landmark, but the three other buildings were excluded from the register. In 1974, a case was brought against the GSA by Don't Tear it Down, Inc., a citizen's group, to prevent the demolition of the Winder Building and the three other buildings for construction of a new office building (*Don't Tear it Down, Inc. v. General Services Administration*, 401 F. Supp. 1194 (D.D.C. 1975)). While it was later determined that the Winder Building would not be demolished, the Advisory Council on Historic Places sought to place the surrounding buildings on the historic register, making it more difficult for GSA to tear them down. After ignoring past complaints on this matter from the Advisory Council, GSA agreed on March 1, 1974, that it

would not demolish the buildings until the matter was submitted to a full Council meeting two months later. Despite this promise, and before legal status was confirmed on this issue, GSA began demolition two days later on Sunday, March 3, 1974. The action was followed by a number of restraining orders, but ultimately the case against GSA was dismissed as moot after GSA took responsibility and apologized for its past actions. As mitigation for the demolition of the other buildings, the GSA allotted money toward the modernization of the Winder Building. While the loss of the other buildings is unfortunate, the money allotted to the Winder Building's modernization restored the building to what it is today.

Photograph of the rear of the Winder Building following the demolition of the Winder Annex to construct a courtyard and an office building.

Myths

One of the unique aspects of the Winder Building that makes it so significant is the number of myths associated with the building. This can be seen on the plaque placed at the front entrance of the building and described above. Despite the fact that only a small number of these myths have actually proved to be accurate, they still add to the building's overall mystique. It was once thought that during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln would visit the Winder Building to receive telegraphs about the progress of the war from the southern and western battle areas as well as view military parades from the building's exterior iron balcony. However, it is documented that the telegraph machines were housed in the Telegraph Office of the Old War Building and that the military telegraph did not have even one line to the Winder Building.

Another unproven myth is that Lincoln kept some of his horses and carriages in the stables positioned behind the Winder Building. It is also believed that President Lincoln visited confederate soldiers who were being held in a dungeon-basement inside the Winder Building. However, according to research, there was never a prison in the basement, nor was anyone ever incarcerated in the building. It is only documented that civilian suspects were questioned in the building's basement. Another myth that has never been proved is that four successive commanding generals of the Union Army (Scott, Halleck, McClellan, and Grant) occupied offices in the Winder Building. Yet, for the most part, most generals during that time were headquartered in what was the Grant Building on the southwest corner of 17th and F Streets. Documents do show, however, that following Lincoln's death, the building was the site of the entire investigation surrounding his assassination, including the place where evidence was amassed.

Without the famous inhabitants, myths, and the beautiful, historic architecture, the Winder Building would not have as much significance as it does today. And while USTR, as its current inhabitant, has begun to outgrow the building (recently housing some employees in a building across the street), USTR is proud to be part of Winder's history.

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Historical Note: This document is intended to provide a general historical overview and, thus, lacks source document citations. The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, however, does possess many of the source documents from which this overview is derived.

Drafted August 2000. USTR gratefully acknowledges the invaluable contribution to the research and drafting of this overview by two college interns: Lindsay Bellows (Smith College) and Ethan Titelman (University of Pennsylvania).